

'You have to live to tell the world': Grandson of Mississippi's only Holocaust survivor shares story

By [Joyce Philippe](#) and [Lindsay Knowles](#) | January 28, 2020 at 8:00 AM CST - Updated
January 28 at 8:35 AM

OCEAN SPRINGS, Miss. (WLOX) - It's been 75 years since the liberation of Auschwitz, the largest concentration camp established by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. Historians estimate 1.1 million people were killed in Auschwitz under Nazi rule during World War II. Gilbert Metz was one of the survivors.

Now, his grandson Joseph Metz of Ocean Springs is sharing his family's history to keep it alive in the memories of future generations.

"My grandfather was in Auschwitz and is a survivor of the death marches from Auschwitz to Gross-Rosen, and from Gross-Rosen to Dachau," he said.

In 1943, Gilbert Metz was a 14-year-old living in France, which was occupied at the time by Germany. It was hard time for Jews. They were not allowed to work and could only shop for two hours each day for food and necessities. They couldn't go to concerts or movies, and they couldn't meet in groups that had more than eight people. They were not allowed to go to the synagogue and were forced to wear a yellow Star of David displayed on their clothes to identify them as being Jewish.

Gilbert and his entire family were arrested in March 1943 by the Germans. They were loaded into cattle cars that were filled shoulder-to-shoulder with people also making the four-day trip. The dehydration on that trip would leave Gilbert's aunt dead. Her death would be the first of many deaths Gilbert's family would experience at the hands of the Nazis.

When they arrived at Auschwitz, the men were separated from the women and children. Lying to the Nazis, Gilbert told them he was 16 instead of 14 so he could stay with his father. It's a move he believes saved his life. His mother and ten-year-old sister were killed in the gas chamber that same night.

Gilbert would spend the next two years in Auschwitz, where he saw unspeakable horrors.

In an interview before he died, he recalled that difficult time:

"One memory that still haunts me is having to drag people to ditches, douse them with gasoline and set them afire. Some were still alive. There were children, babies . . . I still hear their screams. Even after I was married, I would wake up screaming in the middle

of the night because I could still see the faces. The death of my father is also an experience that haunts me."

Toward the end of January 1945, when the Russian Army was getting closer to Auschwitz, the whole camp of 50,000 prisoners were marched for seven days in the snow and cold without coats or warm clothing and shoes.

"The rail lines were being bombed, there was heavy watching of the rail lines and so they moved them to the forest," said Joseph. "If you walked too fast, if you walked too slow, or just if they wanted too, they would shoot you."

Gilbert father was among the thousands killed in the last mass selection in the days leading up to the march. An additional 40,000 Jews would die on the march to Gross-Rosen.

When asked what motivated Gilbert to fight for his life, Joseph said: "In December, before his father was to be gassed, Gilbert saw his father one last time. His father told him, 'You are going to live. You have to live to tell the world what they have done to us.'" And that's exactly what Gilbert did.

When the fighting again came close to the camp, the prisoners were transported to Dachau, where they were liberated by American soldiers on April 29, 1945. Gilbert moved to the States to live with his aunt in Natchez, where he would finish high school. After attending Tulane University in New Orleans for two years, Gilbert was drafted in the Army. He fought in the Korean War before making his way back to the Magnolia State to start a family and a business.

Gilbert and his wife Louise began Metz Industries in 1978, which would grow to include sales reps in Hawaii, Puerto Rico and Alaska. They settled in the Jackson area and had three children.

Now, his grandson Joseph is on the Coast teaching history and sharing his family's amazing legacy.

It's something his grandfather also did.

In 1998, Gilbert would share his story with the world thanks to an online portal created by director Steven Spielberg. The Shoah Foundation is a collection consisting of over 55,000 audiovisual testimonies of survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides.

"Instead of asking, 'Why me, why us?', my grandfather didn't necessarily accept it but he embraced it," said Joseph.

Joseph says he's thankful and proud of not only his family's resilience during such a dark time in history, but also the strength shown by everyone who survived the horrors of Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.

“Most Holocaust survivors that you see could have turned their back on the world and so many of them have not. They continue to try to be ambassadors for good.”
Now, it’s his turn to educate others and pass the story on.

“Everyday that we’re breathing, his story and our family’s story continues.”

LISTEN to a 1989 audio interview Gilbert Metz did with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: <https://bit.ly/2voJmmZ>

READ a written account of Gilbert Metz’s presentation to a group of teenagers: <https://bit.ly/37v5uKG> (Metz 4-5)

READ why Joseph Metz honored his grandfather by tattooing his six-digit Holocaust number on his own wrist: <https://bit.ly/36w04xB> (Metz 6)

Interview with Albert Metz on Youtube: <https://youtu.be/vv8bPxcmPO0>

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<https://www.wlox.com/2020/01/28/you-have-live-tell-world-grandson-mississippi-only-holocaust-survivor-shares-story/>

Holocaust Survivor Gilbert Metz Oral Interview to Teens

By Unknown, Unknown, Unknown

Were you in a concentration camp?

My family was sent to Auschwitz - my mother, father, aunt, and sister. We were herded into cattle cars until there was room for no one else. Then they closed it up and there was only one small hole for air. There was no bathroom, and we were not given water during the four-day trip. Many died from dehydration, but that was only the beginning. My aunt also died on the trip.

Did you lose your mother, father and sister?

When we arrived at the camp, we were given chalk and pencils to write our names on our luggage. We were told we would get it in our new home, that we could live together as a family. Young men under the age of 15, the sick, the elderly, and the women with small children were separated. I used my knowledge of upper-class German to stay with my father, telling them I was 16 rather than 14. I believe that if I had gone with the other group, I would have been gassed that night. My mother and ten-year-old sister died in the gas chamber that night.

What about your father?

My father and I were in the same camp, Auschwitz, but he was eventually sent to Block 14, to be gassed. The people there had to continue working during the day, knowing they were going to be gassed at any time. Through a miracle I was allowed to visit him for ten minutes. I brought him soup and he wanted me to eat it, but I told him I had already eaten, which was a lie. It was hard to say good-bye under those conditions. Then, the next day, Block 14 was empty.

What is one thing that stayed with you?

You get used to the hunger, but thirst follows you anywhere you go.

One memory that still haunts me is having to drag people to ditches, douse them with gasoline and set them afire. Some were still alive. There were children, babies . . . I still hear their screams. Even after I was married, I would wake up screaming in the middle of the night because I could still see the faces. The death of my father is also an

experience that haunts me.

Why did you come to speak to us? You said that you did not speak to middle school students, but you came to our class.

Your teacher sent me your writings. I was so touched. You experienced the Holocaust through your words. They were so full of emotion and depth, I knew you were prepared for my story. Most students do not understand what happened, and you did. Your teacher should be credited with this. She has prepared you well. I'm doing this for one reason only - for the ones who didn't survive.

How did it make you feel, to be treated that way because you were a Jew?

I didn't understand, it was unbelievable, so unreal.

Do you hate those who did this to the Jews?

No, because you don't hate or dislike the Germans today for what their grandparents or parents did. That's just like you don't hate whites for what their great-grandparents did to the slaves.

How do you think you survived?

Shoes were vital for survival in the camp because they kept our feet warm and free of wounds and diseases. Shoes were also beneficial during the hours of labor we performed daily during my two years in concentration camps.

One night, others thought I was dead and threw me out in the snow. When I woke up I went into the barracks and said, "Which one of you SOBs stole my shoes?" I went in and got them back.

What advice would you give teenagers today?

Be tolerant of others, polite, and have ambition. Then you can succeed. Nothing good comes from hatred.

Source: <https://www.teenink.com/nonfiction/interviews/article/5418/Holocaust-Survivor-Gilbert-Metz>

Honoring My Grandfather

BY: JOSEPH METZ

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I have my paternal grandfather's six-digit Holocaust number, 184203, tattooed on my wrist. What was done to him in hate, I do in love.

My grandfather, Gilbert Metz, was known in Auschwitz and Dachau as inmate 184203. To him, these numbers were not just a reminder of his own tribulations during and after the Holocaust—he and his cousin were the only survivors in their family—they were a warning to others not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Living in Jackson, Mississippi, he would visit local high schools and colleges, talking to students about his own experiences, what had happened to the Jewish people, and the dangers of forgetting the Holocaust.

He passed away when I was 13 years old, but in the time I had with him, he taught me so much. He told me, "No matter what people do to you, they can beat you, they can stab you, they can shoot you, but they can never take away your knowledge and life experience." And he would always say, "When something bad happens in life, look for the good in it."

My tattoo in his memory grew out of a terrible experience during my freshman year of college, when I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and falsely accused of something I did not do. Several people doubted and judged me. While all this was happening, I thought about what my grandfather used to tell me, *You are a Metz, and we Metzes can get through anything.*

After the ordeal was over and I was proven innocent, I had my grandfather's Holocaust numbers tattooed on my left wrist. I got the tattoo on December 17, 2012—exactly five years to the day he died. For me, this tattoo will always remain a reminder of him and the unforgettable lessons he stood for.

People have asked me what my grandfather would have thought of my tattoo. I think he would be honored that I am honoring him and his legacy, because, just like him, I now go to schools and talk about the dangers of forgetting the Holocaust. At the same time I think he might not want me to have it, because the numbers are associated with the agony of losing your family. Overall, though, I'm fairly sure he would be OK with it.

My family is OK with it. My dad actually thought about getting that same tattoo when he was younger, but decided against it. He thinks it's cool.

I recognize that not all Holocaust survivors might feel this way about my tattoo. I've only met one other survivor, who told me, "It's a great show of respect to your grandfather." Some people might react negatively to it. But, to me, having this tattoo is continuing the goal of Holocaust survivors to teach young people of today about the tragedies of yesteryear. That is why I talk, why I teach, and why I have this tattoo: *We must never forget.*

Joseph Metz, 19, attends Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, MS.

Source: *Reform Judaism magazine*

Tags: RJ Magazine

